PLAIN TRUTH

May 24, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Romans 8:31-39
John 10:22-30

..."If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."
-John 10:24 (NRSV)

"If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." "...in words we can understand; the facts, please; just the simple, unvarnished, plain truth." Who here this morning couldn't say that, or hasn't said something like that?

Lewis Thomas, President Emeritus of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Center provides a helpful commentary on the text in the first chapter of his recent book. In an address to colleagues with whom he graduated from medical school fifty years ago he said:

> "Almost precisely fifty years ago, all of us passed a milestone in our intellectual development. Within my own memory it was more than a milestone: it was a monument of achievement. You will all remember it, even though it lasted only for a brief period, the span of time between the final examinations and the first weeks of internship. It was that best of all possible times in our lives, the moment when we knew absolutely everything about everything. And for most of us, certainly for me, it was the last moment of its kind in a professional lifetime.
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> "Ever since, it has been one confusing ignorance after another, fifty years of knowing less and less about more and more."

"Tell us plainly?" Thomas lists some of the "items of ignorance," things he doesn't understand, picked up over fifty years. "The Federal Reserve System - what it is, what it does or how it does it... the stock market, the bond market, the word processor, the universe, black holes... and the human mind." We don't have a clue, he says, about what the human mind is. [The Fragile Species, p. 3, 4, 111, 115]

The most valuable lesson science has for us, this distinguished scientist says, is not revealing to us the plain truth but helping us to comprehend something way different - "how little we know, how still less we understand, and how much more there is to learn."

The text almost pleads: "Tell us plainly. Give us plain and simple truth." Lewis Thomas reminds us that truth is not often simple or plain, and that if you assume it is, you may miss it altogether.

Now, we would all benefit in general from a little more simplicity and little less complexity. From IRS forms, to assembly instruction for children's toys, to penetrating a voice mail system and actually talking with a person, to transferring a car title - life does seem cluttered with unnecessary complexity. The professions all seem to be conspiracies against simplicity. I think it was C. S. Lewis who observed that every profession develops a complex vocabulary which functions, at least, to keep outsiders out by making matters so complex that only insiders will understand. Physicians, attorneys, bankers, have linguistic enclaves, special vocabularies, which intimidate most of us with their sheer complexity. "Tell us plainly," we plead. "How sick am I?" "How much is it going to cost?" "When can I have my money?"

Theology and religion are no exception. We have a jargon we use which is not accessible to the uninitiated. The story is told about the day Simon Peter and the distinguished twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich, approached the pearly gates together. They were met there by Jesus who said, "Peter, who do you say that I am?" And Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus said, "That's right, Peter. That is who I am. Please come in. Professor Tillich, who do you say that I am?" The brilliant scholar adjusted his vest, rearranged the tobacco in his pipe, lighted it, took a deep draw and said, "Well now, ontologically speaking, you are the ground of being, being as such, actually. And in the existential dimension, it is plausible to posit that you are the Divine-Human encounter, transcendence and immanence, eternal and finite, the human race's ultimate concern about being and non-being resolved. And in an eschatological dimension, you are future hope, essence of a new Weltanschaung for the cosmos." And Jesus said, "Huh?"

So there is a conspiracy of complexity and we need more simple, plain truth in life including religion. But the real issue is that the truth is not often plain or simple. A real issue before us always is the danger of oversimplification, of reducing complex questions to simple answers and in the process missing something important. I do not think it is even close to reality, and therefore dangerous, to characterize what happened

in South Central Los Angeles three weeks ago as a result of a "poverty of values" or "reproductive righteousness." The Presbyterian Church is preparing to address once again the Biblical, theological and ethical dimensions of abortion. It is a highly volatile and enormously complicated issue. We have produced another lengthy and complicated study. No one is very happy with it. There are many people who know with absolute certainty what the plain truth is in this matter. They know that abortion is the taking of a human life and always wrong. But there are many people for whom truth is not that plain in this matter. And our church will, I fear, once again, make people unhappy because it does not appear to be ready to reduce this complicated issue to slogans and bumper stickers.

Sometimes you can't tell it plainly because the truth is not plain. That is how it was on a cold winter day in Jerusalem many years ago. The issue for the people who were there was very important. Some of them also thought it was simple. I love to picture this scene. "The Festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the Temple, in Solomon's Portico." It's a dusty, sand-colored scene by Zeferelli. A harsh wind blows out of the east, cold. It's why Solomon's Portico had a closed side, to protect it in the winter. For some reason I always think of the opening lines of King Richard III, "Now is the winter of our discontent," when I read this text.

Jesus is walking - it doesn't say why or where, perhaps on the way inside to observe the Festival of Dedication, Hanukkah we call it, when the successful insurrection of the Macabees, against the Syrians and the reclaiming of the Temple are celebrated. People gather around him; they are walking there too, I suppose. They are not happy people. They are on their way to celebrate a moment of high and holy patriotism in their nation's history - Memorial Day for them. But they have made compromises; they have accommodated an enemy. They are not free. It is a "winter of discontent."

I stumble when I read it the way it is written. John says, "The Jews gathered around him." Later, "The Jews took up stones against him." Later still at the end, "the Jews demand his crucifixion." But Jesus was a Jew. So was the man who wrote the Gospel. They all were. I stumble on the words because anti-Semites have used them wrongly, to substantiate their evil racism. Please remember always that when the Fourth Gospel says, "the Jews," it does mean "the Jews." It means a cabal of opportunistic political and religious leaders who for their own benefit collaborated with the Romans. Caiphas, the chief priest, was the chief collaborator. So were some of the Pharisees and Saducees. Those are his advesaries. These are the ones who arranged his execution. When John says, "the Jews," he does not mean Jewish people. He means these opportunists who arranged the

crucifixion of his Lord. And because I cannot say all that every time I read from the Fourth Gospel, I sometimes change it to read, "they."

So "they" gathered around him and now we know who "they" were and they say, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

Why do you suppose he didn't simply say, "The suspense is over. I am the Messiah"? Why all the metaphors. "I am the Good Shepherd." I am the light of the world." Why the secrecy? Why not simply tell the plain truth?

Some have suggested that he didn't say it that day walking in the portico of the Temple because it would have resulted in his immediate arrest and crucifixion. Could be, but I don't think so. There is no lack of physical and emotional courage in Jesus that I know of. I think the reason he didn't say it plainly was, at least in part, because they meant something very different by "Messiah" than he did. That is, it wasn't plain or simple. For them Messiah was a stereotype, a military-political leader who would rally the nation and lead the revolution. Jesus did not see himself in that role.

The confining stereotypes of Jesus have always been a problem for our religion. Someone is always forcing Jesus into a theological or cultural or political mold. The miracle is that Jesus manages to accept and love equally people who believe very different things about him and won't even speak to each other because of their differences about who they believe he is. Catholics, Protestants, evangelicals, liberals - people who love him but won't sit down together at his table. Martin Marty mused once about the trouble Jesus would have even moderating a meeting just between the following Baptists: Jimmy Carter, Harvey Cox, Jesse Jackson, Jessie Helms.

One day, not long ago, I took leave of common sense and tried to engage in conversation the young woman who was handing out evangelist materials on our corner - practicing a kind of confrontational, "in your face" proselytizing. I disagreed with the content of the material and the way it was being presented. I said something to the effect that I didn't think what she was doing was appropriate. She was stunned - I think angry, although the anger quickly became a sweet smile and she said, vehemently, "You must not know <u>my</u> Jesus. Let me tell you about <u>my</u> Jesus." All I could think to say was, "I didn't know he was yours." It was a mistake!

He is not hers, or theirs, or mine, or yours, or the Pope's or the Presbyterian Church's. He does not belong to us. If anything, we belong to him. If he is Messiah, he is the embodiment of something larger than each and all of us, to which we

belong. Jesus did not belong to them. Their stereotype was not the truth about him. So he did not tell them plainly.

Simplicity, plainness, clarity, misleads sometimes. There is information that is accurate but not the truth. The little child who fills a sand bucket with water and says, "See, I have the ocean in my bucket," is accurate but not true. School children were asked to tell the class what their parents did for a living. One five-year-old said, "People come to my father for help. He gives them powerful drugs. And when the drugs make them unconscious, he cuts them with a knife. When they wake up he makes them pay him a lot of money. He's a surgeon." Accurate, but not quite true. [See Leslie Weatherhead, The Christian Agnostic]

The "heresy of exactness," Ernest Campbell called it. Sometimes it's better not to succumb to the temptation to precision and simplicity. Sometimes it is better to confess that this truth is not plain at all. Ernie Campbell remembers a wartime friend who was distraught because his dearest friend was killed in battle. He went to several chaplains asking why and each in turn tried to give an explanation, a theological rationale. Finally he found a Southern Baptist chaplain who listened to his grief and simply wept with him.

Great realities are not often plain: grief, patriotism, passion, love, faith... Sometimes only a poet or the poet in us, can begin to express these truths.

Why doesn't truth strike all of us identically, with the same force and the same depth? Isn't it significant that standing in front of a work of art, some are powerfully moved and others don't get it; or that great music is experienced as profound pleasure by some but by no means all. So, perhaps we must be receptive, open, eager, willing to be possessed by new truth. "I have told you," Jesus said, "but you do not believe." It is true, is it not, that words you have heard all your life, one day shout and penetrate deeply: the National Anthem, the Lord's Prayer, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Plainness is not the only question; of equal significance is our readiness to experience new truth. [See E. Campbell, Locked in a Room With Open Doors, p. 46-54]

Christian faith is not plain and simple. It is, at least in part, pure mystery. It is at least in part the confession that there is more to reality than I will understand. It is, borrowing a page from Lewis Thomas, acknowledging our modesty, how very much about nature and ourselves we do not understand. It is the very basic theological acknowledgement that there is reality larger than I.

And Christian faith is also the life-long responsibility of thinking it through, of trying as plainly as possible to know what we believe and to understand what it means. Having poked a little fun at professional theologians, faith praises God for Paul Tillich who, when the world says, "Tell it plainly," writes three volumes of brilliant Systematic Theology, which thousands of us will read, and be stimulated and fed and nurtured and amazed. [Ibid, Campbell]

He did not tell them plainly. What he said was:

> "My sheep hear my voice, I know them...
> no one will snatch them out of my hand."

There is a final plainness to this matter, an ultimate simplicity. It is, Christian Faith, not finally a matter of having definitions of Jesus pinned down and ratified. It is, Christian Faith, a matter of knowing that you are known by the Good Shepherd...

> "My sheep hear my voice: no one will snatch them from me."

Listen to this testimony by Gerald May, M.D., in his book, Addiction and Grace, about his own journey in the 60s and 70s:

> "I studied all the great slew of psycho-spiritual pop and pap that was percolating across the nation. I read... I meditated. One evening, about six months after my quest began, I was diligently practicing a form of yoga meditation that encourages the free coming and going of all thoughts. In the freedom... one of the thoughts that came was prayer. It was, in the beginning, the prayer of a nine-year-old, embarrassingly immature. 'Dear Jesus, help me.' I would have stifled it immediately had I not been allowing all my thoughts to come and go. As months and years passed, this prayer grew, and with it, my awareness of my desire for God. I realized my exploration was less a professional research project and more a personal spiritual journey." [p. 7-8]

You and I may never have it all figured out and nailed down neatly. Truth may never be plain. But somewhere in you there is a place, a capacity, a willingness, and an eagerness which is not expressed in intellectual categories so much as the nine-year-old's prayer, "Dear Jesus, help me."

You may think about it and struggle with it all your life, but somewhere, I believe, in each of us is a place where we can know the truth - that we belong to the Good Shepherd. That he will never let us go - that there is nothing, as St. Paul put it, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

That is the truth - plain truth.

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Dear God, help us. As we struggle with mystery, as we engage the perplexities and dilemmas of our complicated lives, give us grace to rest in your love, and the peace which comes to those who trust your son, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.